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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RANGOON 000445

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STATE FOR EAP/MLS

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SUBJECT: BURMESE DON'T BUDGE FOR ASEAN

REF: KUALA LUMPUR 8

Classified By: P/E Chief W. Patrick Murphy for Reasons 1.4 (b,d)

11. (C) Summary: Malaysian Foreign Minister Syed Hamid made a brief March 23-24 visit to Burma on behalf of ASEAN, but could only gain access to second-tier regime officials who recited the standard party line on the SPDC's road map to democracy. The Malaysian Embassy tells us that Hamid appealed to the regime to allow him access to all "stakeholders" (e.g. ASSK and other political opposition leaders) in order to get a full picture of the situation and to allow ASEAN to engage key partners in a more informed manner. GOB officials rejected Hamid's request, urging him not to dwell on "specific personalities." Hamid surprised his own Embassy and GOB officials by abruptly returning to Malaysia a day prior to his scheduled departure. The National League for Democracy expressed regret and disappointment that Hamid did not meet with the party or other political opposition groups during his trip. End Summary.

THE USUAL GANG

12. (U) Malaysian Foreign Minister Syed Hamid Albar made a short-notice and brief 24-hour visit to Rangoon March 23-24. The official Burmese press described Hamid as the head of a "Malaysian delegation" that came to Burma at the invitation of the GOB to "pay a goodwill visit." He held discussions with Foreign Minister Nyan Win (who also hosted a dinner in Hamid's honor) and made a courtesy call on Prime Minister General Soe Win. Hamid also met separately with Agriculture Minister Major General Htay Oo, in his capacity as Secretary General of regime's mass-member Union Solidarity Development Association (USDA), and Chief Justice U Aung Toe, in his capacity as Vice Chairman of the National Convention Convening Committee.

13. (C) While the Malaysian Embassy in Rangoon was elusive prior to the visit, on March 30 Malaysian DCM Rizany Irwan Bin Muhamad Mazlan shared views more openly. Rizany told us that FM Hamid emphasized at every meeting that his visit was not a bilateral one, but was in his capacity as Chair of the ASEAN Standing Committee. He underscored to the GOB that he had an ASEAN mandate to fulfill and that his intention was to gather information, not to investigate, evaluate, assess, or interfere.

SAME OLD SONG AND DANCE

14. (C) Hamid appealed for transparency, noting to GOB officials that ASEAN members and others in the international community were "very interested" in the Burma situation. Hamid, said Rizany, cited ASEAN's need to be well informed in order to engage its key partners and that he therefore hoped to get a full picture of the situation in Burma. Hamid specifically appealed to the GOB to allow him to "see all of the stakeholders," who Rizany characterized as Aung San Suu Kyi and other National League for Democracy officials, as well as ethnic leaders and delegates to the National Convention.

15. (C) Rizany said that GOB officials fully acknowledged Hamid's role as an ASEAN envoy but rejected out of hand his requests to see members of the political opposition. According to Rizany, each of the four senior GOB officials with whom Hamid met told the Malaysian FM that he should not dwell on specific personalities (i.e. ASSK), but should rather focus on the "broader interests of the nation."

16. (C) Rizany said that Hamid's discussions with Nyan Win were the most substantive of his talks in Rangoon, although the FM merely rehashed the regime's party line on its "road map to democracy." The meeting with PM Soe Win was "a disappointing 15-minute courtesy call," during which the PM focused solely on bilateral Burma-Malaysia issues in general terms. Rizany added that the Malaysians also requested meetings with senior regime leaders, including Than Shwe and Maung Aye, but the GOB responded that PM Soe Win "was senior enough" for Hamid. Rizany surmised that had Hamid visited as

Malaysian Foreign Minister and not ASEAN envoy, he would likely have been granted direct access to Than Shwe.

17. (C) Hamid's meetings with Maj Gen Htay Oo and U Aung Toe were additional opportunities for the SPDC to extol its self-perceived progress on its road map and sundry other accomplishments of the military. Rizany described the USDA and National Convention briefs as lectures that the regime has delivered previously to many diplomats and other visitors. The USDA also trotted out a video on its development activities, which Rizany said caused Hamid to roll his eyes and check his watch repeatedly.

ENOUGH IS ENOUGH

18. (C) According to Rizany, Hamid announced his immediate return to Kuala Lumpur without warning at lunch on March 24, a surprise to both Malaysian Embassy officers and GOB officials. The Embassy quickly canceled a dinner the Ambassador planned to host for Hamid that evening and scrambled to find the Malaysian flight crew, who were shopping at a local market. Hamid had arrived on a military aircraft for the trip, apparently to allow him schedule flexibility and to return in time for a Saturday political event in his home province. With no substantive meetings left on his Rangoon itinerary on Friday afternoon, Hamid told Malaysian Embassy officers that he desired to return and spend time with his family before the weekend.

19. (C) Rizany described Hamid as "satisfied" with his visit to Burma, but not "happy." Hamid, he said, was concerned that the trip had not been as comprehensive as he had desired. Despite the limitations the regime placed on the visit, Rizany said, Hamid had felt compelled to "not miss the opportunity" to visit Rangoon before the April 17-18 ASEAN Foreign Ministers retreat in Bali.

WHY BOTHER?

10. (SBU) On March 25, the NLD issued a statement expressing regret that Hamid and his delegation had departed Burma without meeting either ASSK or other NLD leaders. On March 30, party leaders U Aung Shwe and U Lwin told us they were extremely disappointed that Hamid made no effort to see them or other opposition figures. "We understand that Hamid was charged with making an assessment of democratic reform," said U Aung Swe, "Frankly, we don't know why he bothered to come."

11. (C) Comment: Hamid's visit was symbolic of the obstacles the regime imposes on any envoy with a pre-announced mandate. The SPDC carefully denied Hamid access to the senior generals and a chance to meet the political opposition, both of which were Hamid's proposed objectives as well as prerequisites for a fully effective visit. The generals may have hoped that by allowing Hamid to visit they could appease ASEAN concerns, but in controlling his itinerary they indicated no desire to modify their behavior. The next test will be whether Hamid shares his frustrations with fellow ASEAN foreign ministers in Bali. End Comment.
STOLTZ